Disclaimer: I know this one sucks, too. I promise my writing is usually a lot better, but this has been a really tough semester and I’m just out of ideas to write well. Any constructive criticism would be greatly appreciated.

“Mix Tapes for My Mom”

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How do you begin to chronicle the relationship of a mother and daughter? When I was a child, if someone asked me who my hero is, I wouldn’t say, “Superman,” or “Wonder Woman,” or even “Joan of Arc.” No, for me the answer was my mom. It still is. She’s saved me, in more ways than one, from death (literally), and from giving up. Sometimes, she is the driving force that keeps me going. I know that sounds like I’m extremely dependent on her, but I think most people need that one person who can be their anchor, their constant. They need that one person they can depend on, no matter what, who has the power, the love and the strength to pull them out of their dark places. For me, that person is my mom. But it wasn’t always this way.

When I was around eight or nine years old, my mother came into my room and told me to clean it up. It was a disaster. Laundry baskets of clean clothes sat on the floor, toys were strewn about everywhere. You couldn’t walk three inches without stepping on a Barbie doll car or an abandoned shoe. She had already asked me several times to clean up my room, but I refused and threw a tantrum, screaming at her, telling her that I was NOT going to clean my room. She yelled at me and kicked a laundry basket and as she left, she looked at me and said, “You are not *my* daughter.” Even though it probably hurt then, now I don’t really blame her for losing her temper. I think being around my dad - who was pretty much always pissed off about something- stressed her out so much that, when my brother and I were refusing to obey, she would lose her temper. I honestly can’t say I blame her because I probably would have done the same thing.

Sometimes, when my mom hears a song on the radio, she calls me right away to tell me about the song and that she liked it and wanted it on a CD. Sometimes, I will hear a song that I think she will like and I’ll email her a YouTube link to it so she can tell me if she would like it on a CD. So, I started making her mix tapes (or mix CD’s…but mix tapes sounds better.) One of the first CDs that I made for her a few years ago that she still has was a mix of Rhianna, Jewel, Don Williams, Explosions in the Sky, Nelly Furtado, Amy Winehouse, David Bowie, the Black Eyed Peas, and a few classic rock songs. (It’s a really bizarre mix, I know, but it totally works.) And this is one of the ways we connect. I smile when she calls and tells me that she likes my music. She’s like me: she likes songs that are either fun to listen and dance to or have a really powerful message. You know how they say music brings people together? I think that’s very true because it’s one of the things that have brought my mom and me together.

Growing up, my dad was very cruel to my brother, mother, and me. Sometimes, he would get drunk and start yelling at us, sometimes hitting us, but my mom always stepped in to try and break up the fight. When he was a teenager, my brother Phillip used to sneak out of the house at night to hang out with his friends and do drugs. One morning, my dad came in, hung over and pissed. He yelled at me and demanded to know where Phillip was. But I had no idea; I had been asleep all night. When he grabbed me and hit me in the face, my mother rushed in and grabbed him away from me and pushed him out of my room. A fight ensued and I thought my mom was going to push my dad down the stairs because she was so angry, but they just yelled at each other and my dad eventually calmed down. Mom was always protecting me like that, but when I was a child and teenager, I used to be a “little shit” (as she very fittingly put it; I won’t even try to disagree with her because I know I was a terrible kid, but to this day, I will never say a negative word about my mom to anyone else). I wouldn’t listen to her when she told me to clean my room, I talked back to her and my dad, and when I was a teenager, I would sneak out of the house at night to get high and hang out with people that I really had no business being around. When I was sixteen, I came home drunk and was yelling at my mom about something, and tried to walk up the stairs. When I did, she grabbed me and I turned around and tried to hit her. She then pushed me to the floor and sat on me. I was being an asshole to her and she didn’t deserve that. To this day, when we talk about that fight, she doesn’t believe me when I tell her I was drunk.

I remember when my mom found out that I cut. She came into my room one day and I was wearing a short-sleeved shirt, when she saw the red gashes on my left arm. I don’t think she really knew what to do about it. All she said was, “You need to stop doing that.” And left my room. I think she could see that I needed help, but didn’t know how to help me. Not long after this, though, she began taking me to see a therapist because that’s all she knew what to do to help me.

My mom blames herself for everything that went wrong growing up. She blames herself for my anger issues, for how rude and disrespectful I was -sometimes still am-to my dad, for my brother turning to drugs and alcohol to escape from the painful environment created by my father. She even blames herself for my brother’s death, to a certain extent. But she blames herself because my dad has spent so many years blaming *her*. If my brother and I talked back to my dad, if we made bad grades in school, or if we got caught sneaking out of the house, it was always her fault in my dad’s eyes and he would tell her so, usually by yelling and screaming at her and telling her she was a worthless mother and wife. He convinced her that she was worthless. Through seeing all this, I felt like he thought *I* was worthless, too. I thought this was just the way everybody lived; I thought men were supposed to be controlling and oppressive and women were supposed to be treated like they were worthless pieces of shit. I expected the men I dated to treat me that way. I’ve spent years trying to push away my boyfriend, Steven, because I truly believed I was worthless. It was a combination of the love of my mother and Steven that has convinced me otherwise.

I used to ask her why she didn’t divorce my dad since he was so mean and angry. She told me, “Because I didn’t want you kids to grow up in a broken home, like John and Allison.” John is my mom’s older son from her first marriage and Allison is my dad’s daughter from his first marriage and both of them have had really difficult and complicated lives. John has been in and out of jail and can’t hold a steady job and Allison used to be a stripper, had a son and got married, then got divorced and lost custody of her son. (I didn’t grow up around Allison because her mom was a psychotic bitch, as I’ve heard from Allison and my dad, and forced my dad to give her full custody when Allison was little.) She thinks that John and Allison may have turned out to be stronger, more independent people had they both grown up in a house with a mother and father.

“If I knew then what I knew now, things would have been a lot different,” she tells me, her voice cracking. I hate hearing her cry, hearing the guilt in her voice. But no matter what I do, I can’t convince her that it’s not her fault. And, to a certain extent, it’s not entirely my dad’s fault, either. I keep trying to explain to her that my brothers and I made our own decisions. I think that maybe if she hadn’t fought with my dad so much, maybe we wouldn’t have fought with him so much, either, but there was nothing we could do to stop him from being mean to us.

Since my brother died, she has changed a lot. She tries not to fight with my dad, even when he’s being a jerk and she tries to be more patient with me, even when I’m being a brat. When I was in high school, even though we would have knock-down-drag-out fights, I always knew she loved me and that I could talk to her about *anything.* To this day, I can literally ask her any question (no matter how personal), and she will answer it honestly. So, because of this, I’m the same way with my friends and I plan to be that way when I have kids because if you’re not honest to your kids when it counts, how are they ever going to learn to be honest? Though seeing her honesty and patience, I have learned to be more honest and patient.

There are times in my life where I’ve been in really dark places and wanted to kill myself. I hated myself, and am very insecure and didn’t believe that I deserved to be happy. If it wasn’t for my mom being such a kind, caring, and loving person, I probably would have ended my life at some point. But I come to her, crying and broken, and she heals me with her hands, her heart, her hugs. “You can do anything you want. Dream big,” she tells me. And I do. She pushes me to try harder, get better grades, to do the best I can. And when I go to those dark places, thinking about her and how much she loves me and cares about me and wants me to do well in life is what pulls me out.

When I look at my friends and their relationships with their mothers, it saddens me because I have very few friends who have close relationships with their mothers. Either they fight all the time with their mother or their mom is very controlling and judgmental, or just plain doesn’t care. But mostly their mothers are judgmental, telling my friends that they’re not pretty enough or smart enough. But not my mom. She has always told me I was smart, pretty, and capable. I was raised by a strong woman to be a strong woman.